

To: Honorable Governor Terry Branstad  
Members of the Eighty-Fifth General Assembly, State Legislature of Iowa

From: The Iowa Natural Resource Commission

January 17, 2012

**NRC Annual Report to the Governor and General Assembly**

The Iowa Natural Resource Commission (NRC) respectfully submits its Annual Report to the Governor and General Assembly of Iowa. The report represents the major activities and accomplishments of the NRC for 2011 and includes the commission's recommendations for policy and legislative changes for 2012.

The NRC extends its thanks for your time and consideration of the report and recommendations, and stands willing to answer any question or receive comments.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Gregory Drees". The signature is fluid and cursive, written in a professional style.

Gregory Drees, Arnolds Park, Chair  
Margo Underwood, Clear Lake, Vice-Chair  
Dennis Schemmel, Grimes, Secretary  
Kim Francisco, Lucas  
Janelle Rettig, Iowa City  
Dr. Sally Prickett, Glenwood  
Conrad Clement, Cresco

**Report to the Governor and General Assembly**  
Iowa Natural Resource Commission  
January 17, 2012

The Iowa Natural Resource Commission (NRC) submits the following report to Governor Branstad and the Iowa General Assembly. The report discusses the accomplishments and status of the programs administered by the Conservation and Recreation Division of the Iowa Department of Natural Resources (DNR). Based on issues regarding the state of natural resources in Iowa over the last year, the report also makes legislative recommendations for consideration by the Governor and General Assembly.

The NRC implores the Governor and General Assembly to hold the protection and enhancement of Iowa's natural resources in the highest regard during the legislative policy-making process. The NRC regards natural resources management to be an inherent duty of decision-making legislators, and the preservation and enhancement of the state's natural wonders should also be viewed as economic development tools.

Public polling continues to illustrate that the majority of Iowans want broader recreational opportunities and restored natural resources. The electorate overwhelmingly approved the Iowa Land & Water ballot initiative in 2010, sending the message that they are willing to pay the price for cleaner air, soil and water.

Yet while the DNR continues to face stiff challenges in its charge to protect and enrich Iowa's inherent resources, department under-funding remains the most daunting obstacle. The NRC urges the Governor and General Assembly, during its appropriations process, to rethink the fiscal obligations necessary for the DNR to execute its vital and essential work.

### **Major Accomplishments of the NRC in 2011**

Meeting monthly in Des Moines during the 2011 calendar year, the NRC worked closely in partnership with DNR personnel in matters of fish and game regulation, the preservation and enhancement of state parks, forests and preserves, conservation law enforcement mandates, land acquisitions and management agreements.

- The DNR's Lake Restoration and Water Quality Improvement Programs continued to receive NRC support and increased the public's use of Iowa lakes in 2011. Iowa lakes generate \$1.9 billion in annual in-state spending.
- The NRC gave its final stamp of approval to the Iowa State Park Design Guide, which will provide a long-term vision for state park construction credence and architectural integrity to all future building construction within the system.
- The NRC continued its annual role in assessing and updating Iowa's hunting, fishing and trapping regulations to best manage those renewable resources.
- The NRC continued its role in approving public land acquisitions totaling more than 2,400 acres in 2011. These purchases of public land, in conjunction with securing permanent conservation easements, add to the public's access to, and enjoyment of, Iowa's natural resources. Land acquisitions and easements are funded by federal or targeted dollars that cannot be used for any other purpose. No state General Funds are used, and the NRC approves the payment of local property taxes amounting to more than \$800,000 annually for lands under its authority.
- The NRC renewed its vigilance in promoting cutting edge strategies in DNR construction, management and land acquisition projects. NRC-influenced planning includes: Dark Sky Lighting that reduces ambient light pollution and encourages downward-sourced lighting techniques; Low Impact Development (LID) that encourages storm water management through the use of rain gardens, bio-swales, pervious paving and wetland restoration; Green Construction that incorporates geothermal, solar and eco-friendly natural material uses.
- The NRC gave final approval to a mourning dove hunting season in Iowa. More than 22,000 hunters registered to hunt doves, and though the economic impact of this participation is yet to be quantified, it is deemed significant. Although harvest numbers are yet unavailable, staff field reports show high success rates.
- The NRC approved the first contract with the Joanne O'Connor Trust under the new Wildlife Habitat on Private Lands program, enrolling 192 acres into the pilot project. The initiative is designed to promote soil, water conservation on private property through habitat development, while at the same time making those acres available to public access.
- Despite ever-growing challenges from private and public economic sectors and a general downturn in recreational discretionary spending, the NRC worked with the DNR, Central Group and Capital Hotel Management to improve operations at Honey Creek

Resort. The focus has been on retooling marketing strategies, reducing expenses and streamlining services in order to maintain quarterly bond payments and securing the goal of making the resort a self-sustaining entity.

- The NRC approved a long list of REAP projects, empowering counties and cities to improve recreational opportunities through infrastructure, parks, trails and waterways construction events.

### **2012 NRC Legislative Recommendations**

As the Eighty-Fifth General Assembly convenes, the NRC urges the Iowa Legislature to lend due recognition in its decision-making process to the DNR. Among the recommendations of the NRC are:

- Include in the Governor's budget a means to retire the debt structure at Honey Creek Resort so the DNR does not have to continue to find funds within its already under-funded budget to meet bond payments. Honey Creek is a marvelous state asset and should be viewed as that – a state, and not a DNR, project – that cannot prove profitable until principal and interest bonds are paid off.
- Raise the state sales tax by one percent, automatically devoting 3/8 of each penny to the betterment of Iowa's natural resources as prescribed by the passage of the Iowa Land & Water Legacy campaign in 2010. The act would dedicate an estimated \$150 million annually to the state's woefully under-funded conservation, habitat and recreational initiatives.
- Recognize and support the DNR's communications and outreach programs designed to increase younger Iowan's connections with the state's natural resources. Youth participation with mentored hunting and fishing programs and hunter education and shooting sports in school programs are vital in keeping future generations interested in, and working for, outdoor recreational opportunities.
- Continue the multi-year funding for state park infrastructure improvements. The Legislature's \$5 million appropriation in 2011 to upgrade aging and flood-ravaged infrastructure in the state parks system should be renewed annually, leveraging resources by partnering with the Iowa Parks Foundation.
- Fully fund the REAP coffers at \$20 million annually. REAP grants are time-tested to be highly successful avenues for counties and cities to fund conservation, recreation and infrastructure projects.
- Return funding for the DNR's Lake Restoration and Water Quality Improvement Programs to the former level of \$8.6 million annually. Iowans value healthy lakes and respond to restoration programs by significantly increasing recreational usage.
- Provide funds for forest management in the state parks system to regenerate oak and hickory forests in Iowa. Educational programs should be funded to demonstrate timber

stand improvement, prescribed fire techniques and research on diseases threatening our forest resources.

- Preserve the language in the mourning dove hunting bill originally approved by the NRC that bans the use of toxic lead shot. It is time to proactively promote the use of non-toxic shot in Iowa's uplands, just as we have done in our wetland environments for more than two decades.
- Reconvene the Deer Study Advisory Committee to provide guidelines necessary for the DNR to effectively manage the deer population for all the people of Iowa.

### **Conclusion**

The NRC is an entity of Governor-appointed citizen volunteers with diverse backgrounds, interest and personalities. Commissioners share a love of the outdoors and a sense of responsibility to protect and enhance the natural resources of Iowa.

Polling and other survey tactics illustrate that Iowa citizens care deeply about natural resources and the recreational opportunities they provide. The NRC – in partnership with the DNR and other local, state and federal organizations and agencies – works steadfastly to that end.

A passionate and professional DNR family and its NRC support group will continue to strive tirelessly to place Iowa's natural resources on a lofty level of priority and favor.

The NRC thanks the Governor and General Assembly for the opportunity to submit this report and invites further inquiry and conversation about these issues.

Respectfully,

Gregory Drees, Arnolds Park, Chair  
Iowa Natural Resource Commission

Margo Underwood, Clear Lake  
Dennis Schemmel, Grimes  
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